JustWrite Inspires

BY DENISE RAMBACH

As a high school English teacher in an innercity school, day-to-day frustrations come in many different forms—as does the inspiration to deal with them. I am constantly working on ways to get students to come to class; then, once they are there, I need a whole new set of strategies to motivate them and keep them interested.

One idea, the JustWrite program, grew out of this search for strategies, and the program has since taken on a life of its own. My motivation for developing JustWrite initially stemmed from the challenge I accepted in becoming a member of Jaxwrite, a Jacksonville, Florida, site of the National Writing Project, and taking part in the site's summer institute. As the final assignment of that institute, we were asked to put in writing what we had learned from our Jaxwrite experience and flesh out how we would implement these ideas in our classrooms. That's how JustWrite was born. Little did I know where it would go from there.

JustWrite, as I imagined that day, would be a program to motivate my tenth grade students to do just that: "just write." So many students have the ability to write but lack incentive. This would be a program for them. Throughout the course of a year, I envisioned, JustWrite students would keep writing portfolios and monitor their progress through peer evaluation and student-teacher conferences. When it became a reality, the JustWrite program was all that, but often, it seemed, the offshoot ideas that our enthusiasm generated along the way were what really captured people's hearts.

Inspiration Breeds...

One of my students' favorite JustWrite outgrowths, for example, was the writing buddies idea through which my tenth grade students became writing buddies with members of a first grade class. The project involved my students going to the elementary school and coaching their writing buddies with the topic "What Christmas means to me." With help from my students, each first-grader generated his own Christmas story. When that part of the project was completed, my students took the handwritten copies back to our classroom, where we compiled the stories and bound them into a booklet. As a final touch, we gave each first-grader a copy of the booklet—along with a specially designed JustWrite T-shirt.

Three years later, the JustWrite program had gained enough of a foothold to merit a $26,000 state grant. To strengthen the initial program, the JustWrite mentor project was developed. For this offshoot project, interested and qualified junior and senior students were trained and paid to serve as writing mentors for our tenth-graders who were required to take a state writing assessment. Qualifying as a mentor meant a student had done well on the state writing assessment and had a good recommendation from a current English teacher.

The following year, JustWrite merited a $4,500 local enrichment grant. With that money, we further expanded the JustWrite mentoring project to include a "buddies" component similar to the writing buddies project we'd begun a few years earlier. These mentors—tenth grade students from my first period English II class—chose to adopt a third grade class at a feeder elementary school. Before we began, the elementary school teacher and I met to discuss strategies that would help his students in their writing while encouraging my students (through their coaching work) to see the bigger picture of moving one's writing from sentences to an essay. In the spring, as our culminating activity, the elementary students came to the high school to complete a writing response to literature. The activity grew to event status, grabbing the attention of a local television station, which—because of the station's interest in reading programs in the schools—covered the story for its education segment.

When I saw how much my students enjoyed working with the third-graders that year, I jumped at an opportunity for them to become email Santas to a first grade class taught by a friend of mine. Around December, the first-graders emailed letters to Santa, and my students, playing Santa, answered them. As part of this project, I videotaped my students writing and emailing the letters, and the first grade teacher videotaped students receiving their emails on her end. The tape proved to be a real ego boost for my tenth-graders. Seeing the first-graders' reactions to the letters certainly inspired many of them to continue with their writing buddies. But more than this, the experience—whether they realized it or not—taught them something about the power of words. This, in turn, inspired many of my students to continue polishing their own writing.

Through this and other such projects, JustWrite has had a positive impact on our school and has played a part in the school's growing writing success. But the heart of this story is the cumulative effect of inspiration. Inspiration of one teacher leads to the inspiration of a new program, which in turn leads to the inspiration of any number of students and lives. It's an amazing chain of events...and one of endless possibilities.

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Zach's Story

BY DENISE RAMBACH

It is truly amazing what a little inspiration can do. Amid the success of the JustWrite program at our school (see story, left), I broadened my focus on student achievement to include reading. This idea was prompted, in part, by my school's low reading comprehension scores on state assessments. Surely I could imagine something that would encourage students to "just read" as JustWrite had done for their writing. Out of this query came JustRead.

JustRead was funded by an enrichment grant. With the money, I bought multicultural books for my classroom. Now, on Fridays, students write in their journals and then select a book

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